DECONSTRUCTING POSTMODERN TELEVISION IN *TWIN PEAKS*

Theresa Geller

Theresa Geller is an Ph.D student in English and the Unit for Critical and Contemporary Theory at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. She is writing a dissertation reinterpreting Western popular culture motifs via feminist, queer, and post-colonial theory.

I believe that the only line to follow is to produce programmes for TV, or whatever, which produce in the viewer or the client in general an effect of uncertainty and trouble. It seems to me that the thing to aim at is a certain sort of feeling or sentiment. You can't introduce concepts, you can't produce argumentation. This type of media isn't the place for that, but you can produce a feeling of disturbance, in hope that this disturbance will be followed by reflection. I think that's the only thing one can say, and obviously it's up to every artist how to create that disturbance.[1]

J.-F. Lyotard

Emanating from Lyotard's line of thought, it has been argued that "as prime site for the representation of ideas about 'life on the surface,' popular culture attracts considerable attention in postmodern politics."[2] I will address the ways in which the television series *Twin Peaks* articulates the issues at stake in (feminist) postmodernism, particularly in its epiphanic disturbances but also in its broader textual significations. Although most, if not all, television series abide by the "correct rules, the endemic desire for reality with objects and situations capable of gratifying it," *Twin Peaks* directly challenges this "general model for the visual or narrative arts" within the framework of mass media.[3]

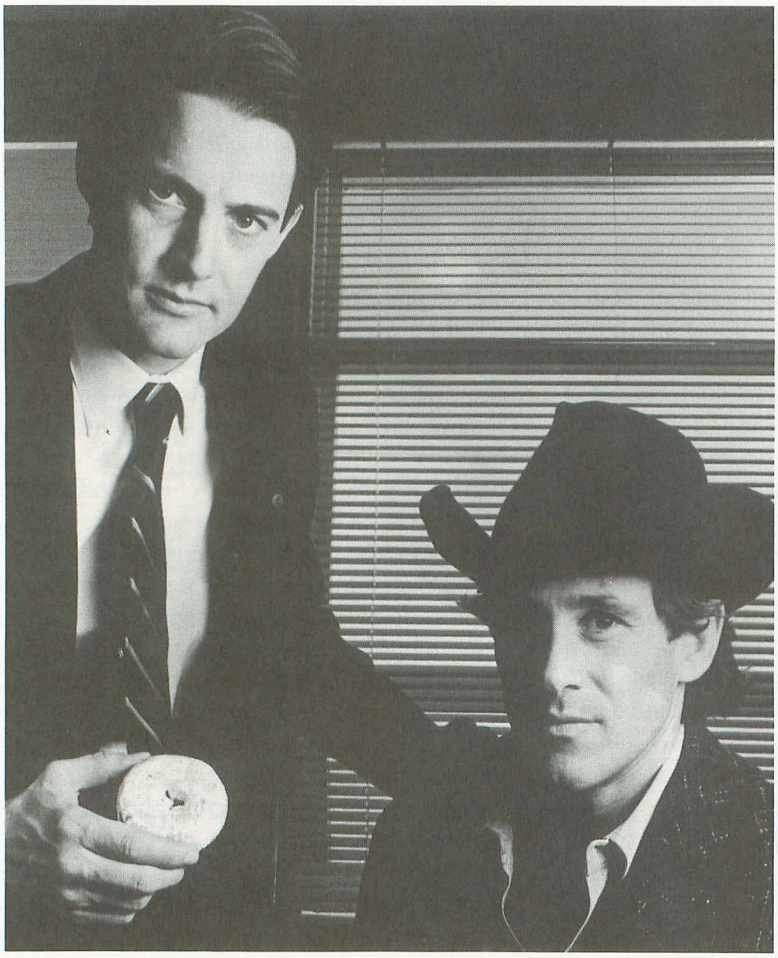
Twin Peaks meets this challenge by fully embodying the potentialities of postmodernism—hyperreality, simulacrity, pastiche, and an "incredulity toward metanarratives."[4] This television series incorporates into its very substance the multiple fascinations of the postmodern as Fredric Jameson lists them: the "whole 'degraded' landscape of schlock[5] and kitsch,[6] of tv series[7] and *Readers Digest*, of advertising[8] and motels, of the late show[9] and the grade-B Hollywood film,[10] of so-called paraliterature, with its airport paperback categories of the gothic and the romance,[11] the popular biography[12], the murder mystery[13], and the science fiction[14] or fantasy novel.[15] By evoking this plurality of postmodern signifiers, *Twin Peaks* forms an aesthetic "something like camp or 'hysterical' sublime... an experience bordering on terror, the fitful glimpse, in astonishment, stupor, and awe, of what is so enormous as to crush human life altogether."[16] This life-crushing aesthetic of "terror" and "disturbance" are, from the first scene of Laura Palmer's blue corpse to Agent Cooper's trip to the Black Lodge and subsequent embodiment of "Bob," the sentiments of this television series.

Twin Peaks' disturbance stems from the structures of fragmentation, and the violence it implies, articulated in both the cinematic and narrative elements. The camera eye with its particularly skewed gaze[17] contextualizes the narrative in such a way as to bring to the surface the hyperreal as Baudrillard defines it: "the whole newsreel of the present which gives the sinister impression of kitsch, retro, and porno all at the same time."[18] By bringing these "sinister" codes to the surface in a multiplicity of narratives, especially narratives without closure, *Twin Peaks* offers a rich postmodern critique of the metanarratives of race, gender, history, psychology, Law, science, realism, patriarchy and the mastery of the centered subject implied in each.

As Annette Kuhn has argues, "It is often woman—as structure, character, or both—who constitute the motivator of the narrative, the 'trouble' that sets the plot in motion."[19] The narrative motivation of this text is Laura Palmer;[20] it is her dead body that introduces us to the hyperreality of *Twin Peaks*. According to Baudrillard:

> From medium to medium the real is volatilized; it becomes an allegory of death, but it is reinforced by its own destruction; it becomes the real for the real , fetish of the lost object—no longer object of representation, but ecstasy of denegation and its own ritual extermination.[21]

Laura Palmer is the fetishized lost object, and in this way, works within the text as a metaphor for the real. It is the moment of her



death which sets the narrative in motion, and from that moment on, Laura Palmer functions as an obvious simulacrum; the narrative can only articulate her as "that which is always already reproduced" but forever absent in it/herself.[22] She is proliferated in a number of discourses including her diaries, dreams, high school photographs, and other characters' memories of her. "But simulacra are not only a game played with signs; they imply social rapports and social power."[23] And in this case, Laura Palmer signifies the social power of sexuality, specifically the investigation of "woman" and its underlying relation to patriarchy.

The murder of Laura Palmer and then later her cousin/ double Madeline Ferguson (a hybrid of Madeline and Scottie Ferguson) recalls *Vertigo* with its motif of murder, doubling and the investigation of femininity. In obviously citing Hitchcock, through its pastiche of narratives concerning the present absence of the threatening Woman, the same questions concerning his film texts arise in addressing the textual systems of *Twin Peaks*.[24] Like its Hitchcock and film noir predecessors such as *Laura* and *The Maltese Falcon*, *Twin Peaks* "continually demonstrates that despite the often considerable violence with which women are treated ...they remain resistant to patriarchal assimilation,"[25] as Tania Modleski has pointed out concerning Hitchcock. In my analysis here, I assume that *Twin Peaks* in its portrayal of women calls into question the very notions of sexuality itself and thus threatens to destabilize the gender identity of protagonists and viewers alike. Yet, the recuperation of 'woman' enacted in the closure of the films by Hitchcock articulates well the conservative ideological resolution upon which dominant cinema relies. *Twin Peaks*, on the other hand, through its obscure dialogue and filming techniques as well as its serialization allows for no easy closure and, in fact, offers a chaotic, Imaginary discourse in order to begin to expose the structuration of the feminine within the phallocentric economy. It is in the mystery of Laura with its partial and contingent resolution that the critique of patriarchy ruptures through the surface of the televised text.

The episode of Maddie's murder functions as a narrative climax in that "Bob" is revealed to

us after a season and a half. It is when Maddie tells her Uncle Leland, Laura's father, that she is leaving that we see Leland look in the mirror and "Bob" is the face of his reflection. "Bob" is the face of the evil, crazed rapist/ killer that society projects 'outside'—the wild man not contained within, or contaminating, the boundaries of 'decent' society. So, when Leland looks into the mirror and sees 'Bob' we are shocked. Yet, the shock is that Daddy is evil, that the narrative exposes to us violently that the threat, specifically the threat to women, is contained not simply within the confines of the domestic space [i.e., the lurking Other of Jason, Freddie, and other suburban monsters about to come in] but the fearsome locus is patriarchy itself and patriarchy that passes itself off as loving and benign (Leland has been signified as quite impotent: dancing, crying, singing, grey-haired, harmless). And, of course, the fact that "Bob" shows himself in the mirror offers a rich Lacanian reading of the issues at work in patriarchy and representation. The Lacanian mirror stage is recalled in this act of double recognition and reveals that on the other side of the mirror (the search for Laura's killer, significantly, undertaken by men of the Law) is not woman, but patriarchy itself—the unstable male identity. This mirror image shows well the male subject's relationship to the mirror stage and the preoedipal, fragmentary, sadistic experiences that entails.

The episode where Leland/"Bob" is captured begins with the 'posse' filmed from below, emphasizing a connection to Westerns and signifies the showdown to come between the Law (the men are police and FBI agents) and the Law of the Father (Leland/ "Bob"). Yet, this battle will be far from the normal cinematic operations of binary discourse with a simple good guys beat bad guys when *the* answer is discovered; this is established by the multiplicity of angled camera shots and obtuse *mise-en-scene*. It is when Cooper discovers a page of Laura's diary that he discovers the 'truth' of his own dream in which Laura told him who had killed her. Symbolically here, the 'truth' of the violence of patriarchy lies within the unconscious of patriarchal Law itself—the investigation of 'woman' reveals the 'truth' of patriarchy itself. Laura's truth which "no one in the world would believe" is what must be revealed here in order to discover "Bob". The narrative also reveals the difficulty in this endeavor:

> Cooper: Laura and I had the same dream.
> Deputy Andy: But that's impossible.
> Cooper: Yes, it is.

This psychic fragmentation is explored further through Leland/"Bob"'s confession. "Bob" articulates Leland (the surface of patriarchy) as "weak, full of holes, with a large hole where his conscious used to be." After "Bob" escapes Leland's conscious and before he dies, Leland recognizes his crimes and goes on to explain that Laura died because she *wouldn't* let "them" (I read "them" here as patriarchal law) take her. "She was too strong for them," says Leland. Leland's confession saves Laura from the narrative that had to that point cast her as victim and sexual deviant (she liked 'perverse' sex, she advertised in porno magazines). Through Leland's admittance to *his* weakness to violent patriarchal forces, Laura's death is recast as resistance rather than sexual victimization.

This portrayal of patriarchy as 'evil' is further conveyed in the closing scene of the episode. The original 'posse' has gathered in the woods after Leland's death (except Hawk,the Native American deputy, is replaced by Major Briggs, signifying another position of white male authority) and they discuss "Bob":

> Truman: He was completely insane.
> Cooper: Think so?
> Albert Rosenfelt (coroner): People saw him in visions—Laura, Maddie, Sara Palmer.

[The truth of patriarchy that women *know*—daughter, wife, niece all *see* "Bob's" face—but the (male) "world would not believe" as Laura states in her diary.]

> Truman: I'm having a hard time believing.
> Cooper: Is it any easier to believe a man

would rape and murder his own daughter, anymore comforting?
Harry: No.
Major Briggs: An evil that great in this beautiful world, finally does it matter what the cause?
Cooper: Yes, because it is our job to stop it.
Albert: Maybe that's all 'Bob' is—the evil that men do—maybe it doesn't matter what we call it.
Harry: But if it was real, and here, and we had him trapped and he got away, where is 'Bob' now?

Here a plurality of postmodern stakes are articulated. As Baudrillard contends, "The unreal is no longer that of a dream or of fantasy, of a beyond or a within, it is that of a *hallucinatory resemblance of the real with itself.*" [26] Patriarchy, as it is articulated through "Bob," a mobile and fluid force rather than isolatable and locatable, is shown to be a ubiquitous simulation of power.

The incredulity towards the metanarrative of patriarchy fragments into the deconstruction of all metanarratives exposed in the series, including psychiatry,[27] History,[28] et al., because the revelation of the 'truth' of patriarchy has necessitated the decentering of phallogocentrism itself. Beyond the revelation of father as rapist/murderer, beyond the textual responsibility placed on *men* (as opposed to typical discourse which shoulders responsibility on women) to uncover and end patriarchal oppression—to find "Bob"—beyond the fact that "Bob" himself is revealed not as a monolithic Other lurking 'outside' but as the shifting and ever-elusive patriarchal violence behind the facade of the most benevolent men, the narrative constructs 'truth'/reality itself as non-monolithic.

Phallogocentric metanarratives of the rational, of reason, of the "real" itself are brought under scrutiny in *Twin Peaks* in its consciously constructed anti-detective story. To this extent, Rosenfelt's advise to Agent Cooper to "Go on whatever vision quest you require. Stand on the

rim of the volcano," echoes Helene Cixious' comment in "The Laugh of the Medusa" that "a feminine text cannot fail to be more than subversive. It is volcanic."[29] A truly volcanic interrogation of patriarchy can only be undertaken in 'feminine' discourse. The proliferation of non-Western, non- rational discourses, especially the use of mysticism displaces phallogocentric discourse: as Toril Moi argues "the mystical experience is precisely an experience of the loss of subjecthood, of the disappearance of the subject/object opposition, it would seem to hold a particular appeal to women, whose very subjectivity is anyway being denied and repressed in patriarchal discourse."[30]

The investigation of patriarchy that takes place within the narrative cannot follow phallogocentric, hegemonic discourse; instead, the 'truth' lies in the alternative and feminized discourses represented in non-Western, and specifically colonized traditions. Albert Rosenfelt speaks of Buddhism and Ghandi; Deputy Hawk is deeply ingrained in Native American tradition; these are guiding voices for Cooper, as well as his own discourses of Eastern tradition, specifically, the Dali Llama (in the episode in which he demonstrates the rock and bottle method, using a map and pointer, Cooper launches into a long lecture concerning the Dali Llama, Tibet and the consequences of its colonization).

It is in riddles, "magic," Tibetan method, instinct, dreams, channeling, contact with beings from other astral planes, psychic phenomena, and the like that science's language games are displaced and "Bob" is ultimately discovered. Science is, as Cooper discovers, incapable of dealing with the source of violence within the language of *Twin Peaks*. "Bureau guidelines" cannot help Cooper discover "Bob" because "science plays its own game; it is incapable of legitimating other language games."[31] Science is, as Lyotard points out, "actively involved in destroying the traditional knowledge of peoples, perceived from that point forward as minorities or potential separatist movements destined only to spread obscurantism."[32]

Yet it is these alternative languages, spoken by the subaltern, that ultimately articulate disempowerment. It is significant that at the beginning of the episode where Cooper discovers "Bob" that Rosenfelt as voice of his Indian neocolonial philosophy of non-violence and Hawk as voice of Native American culture direct Cooper with their "obscurantism": Rosenfelt: "the coordinations for this destination and hardware is you... stand alone and do your dance, just find the beast before he strikes again"; Hawk: "you're on a path, you don't need to know where it leads, just follow." Thisfinally leads Cooper to hear, and believe, the voice of 'woman,' Laura Palmer when she says "my father killed me"—significantly, heard in his own unconscious.

This is the other side of a query which is constantly raised for women: how to engage at all from a feminist position... with forms or concepts of representation which depend for their analysis on the idea of the unconscious: how to move against the very nature of every day language, which leads to the question of Riddles, 'what would a politics of the unconscious be?'[33]

"The owls are not what they seem"; "That gum you like is coming back in style"; "That milk is warm now but it will get cold on you"; not to mention a backwards talking dwarf and riddle-bearing apparitional giant, these are the multiple ways in which *Twin Peaks* struggles to convey the unconscious—to speak itself Other-wise. In this way, *Twin Peaks* embodies Lyotard's call to the postmodern, that is, it "puts forward the unpresentable in presentation itself; that which denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of a taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable; that which searches for new presentations, but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable."[34]

This "unrepresentable" is communicated through the structures of schizophrenia. How else can these unanswerable riddles, apparitions, messages from outer space, dreams, obtuse communiques from colonized traditions, space people and logs, dancing dwarfs, on and on, be interpreted other than "as a breakdown in the signifying chain, that is, the interlocking syntagmatic series of signifiers which constitutes an utterance or a meaning?"[35] This schizo-

phrenia or semiotic fragmentation implies the 'death' or irreparable decentering of the subject itself. This decentering takes place on the level of the subject of the narrative—every character from Cooper and Leland to Laura and Josie—on the level of the narrative codes as articulated in the proliferation of undecipherable images and language games, and on the level of the viewer who is allowed very little, if any, mastery over the narrative trajectory. In this way, *Twin Peaks* short-circuits traditional interpretive temptations on the part of the audience.[36] And this is where, unlike most, if not all, other television shows, *Twin Peaks* does not heed "the diverse invitations to suspend artistic experimentation, (and their) identical call for order, desire for unity, for identity, for security, or popularity."[37] (This last point is most evident in the cancellation of the series.) It is in communicating the terror of violent patriarchy as well as conveying other destabilizing power relations through a schizophrenic narrativization that we can in fact identify some "moment of truth" within this postmodern text.[38] The "unexpected move," the "new statement," and the disorientation[39] *Twin Peaks* imparts leaves the viewer with a sentiment of trouble or disturbance which, despite Fredric Jameson, leaves afterimages which haunt the mind.[40]

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[1]Lyotard, J. -F., "Brief Reflections on Popular Culture," *ICA Documents 4*, ed. Lisa Appignanesi (London: ICA, 1986).

[2]Lee, Janet, "Care to Join Me in an Upwardly Mobile Tango?: Postmodernism and the 'New Woman,'" *The Female Gaze*, eds. Lorraine Gamman and Marsha Marshment (Seattle, Washington: Real Comet Press, 1989), 166.

[3]Lyotard, J. -F., *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. G. Bennington and B. Massumi (Minneapolis: U. of Minnesota Press, 1984), 75.

[4]Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, xxiv.

[5]A small northwestern town adapted from soap operas such as *Peyton Place*.

[6]For example, the bizarre props/lines such as "a fish in the percolator."

[7]The search for Mike, the one-armed man, taken from the 1960s television show *The Fugitive*.

[8]The obsession with "a good cup of joe" or "a fine piece of pie" is reminiscent of the surrealism of advertising; Laura Palmer advertises in porno magazines.

[9]The show is filled with arcana, such as names, themes, and scenes from films such as *Laura*, Hitchcock films, *Double Indemnity*, etc.

[10]For example, the name "Twin Peaks" is from the beginning of *Mondo Topless* (Russ Meyer, 1966); fashions and music culled from exploitation films of the '50s and '60s, e.g. *The Sinister Urge* (Edward Wood, 1962).

[11]Gothic and romance genre codes are everywhere, e.g. the narrative of Donna and James reads like a teen romance; gothic overtones of incest, haunted buildings, perverse sexuality and secrets dominate the series.

[12]For example, the published diary of Laura Palmer; Agent Dale Cooper recalls D. B. Cooper, thief and airplane hijacker; and, of course, Sheriff Harry S. Truman.

[13]The Laura Palmer mystery, of course.

[14]Cooper receives messages from outer space; Major

Briggs disappears, supposedly on a spaceship.

[15]The dreams, 'Bob,' the giant, the dwarf all are motifs of the fantastic.

[16]Jameson, Fredric, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,* (North Carolina: Duke U. Press, 1991) 2.

[17]Here I refer to the particular camera work, often at odd camera angles or rapidly spinning, used in *Twin Peaks* which is peculiar to the medium of television.

[18]Baudrillard, Jean, *Simulations*, trans. P. Foss, P. Patton, and P. Beitchman (New York: Semiotext(e), Inc., 1983), 72.

[19]Kuhn, Annette, *Women's Pictures: Feminism and Cinema* (New York: Routledge, Chapman & Hall, 1985) 34.

[20]Recently, my interest in Laura Palmer, out of which this essay emerged, has been supplimented by the near narrative chaos the character Josie poses to the text of *Twin Peaks* as well as, I have to admit, the reading I propose here. Josie is the locus upon which discourses of race, gender, sexuality, and economics, particularly in terms of neocolonialism and multinational capitalism, converge. As such, it is significant to me that as the narrative of Laura Palmer, as I will develop here, unfolds to eventually recuperate her from the margins of sexuality and gender, Josie is increasingly denigated, functioning as a site of racial and sexual disavowal within the text.

[21]Baudrillard 144.

[22]Baudrillard 44.

[23]Baudrillard 88.

[24]Baudrillard 15.

[25]Baudrillard 3.

[26]Baudrillard 142.

[27]A discussion of Dr. Jacoby and Laura's relationship to him as patient would be quite interesting, especially since she is, to an extent, made into an hysteric, reflecting once again out onto the narrative which is indeed hysterical.

[28]A fine example of the deconstruction of *grande histoire* is Ben Horne's rewriting of the Civil War in order to regain his 'sanity' or mastery, even if fictively; this master fiction rewards him with patriarchal status after being 'unmanned' by his lover, the phallic woman, Catherine Martell.

[29]Cixious, Helene, "The Laugh of the Medusa," trans. Paula and Keith Cohen, quoted here from *New French Feminisms,* eds. Elaine Marks and Isabella de Courtivron (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1980).

[30]Moi, Toril, *Sexual /Textual Politics* (New York: Metheun, 1985) 136.

[31]Moi 40.

[32]Moi 30.

[33]Rose, Jaqueline, *Sexuality in the Field of Vision,* (London: Verso, 1986) 213.

[34]Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition,* 81.

[35]Jameson 26.

[36]Jameson 92.

[37]Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition,* 73.

[38]Jameson 47.